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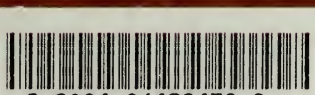

A

MINISTER'S FAREWELL;

BEING A SERMON PREACHED IN

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, MONTREAL,

ON THE EVENING OF

SABBATH, 25TH SEPTEMBER, 1864.

BY THE

REV. WILLIAM SNODGRASS.

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1864.

To the

People of St. Paul's Church, Montreal.

My Dear Friends,

Some of you have expressed a wish to have the following sermon in printed form; and by the unsolicited kindness of one of you, I am enabled, without expense, to place it in your hands accordingly. Hurriedly written in circumstances of a very perturbing kind, the sermon possesses no intrinsic value whatever. Any interest that belongs to it is derived from the occasion on which it was delivered. Such as it is, it may serve betimes to remind you of one who found it to be no easy thing to say to you, *Farewell.*

I remain,

Yours very affectionately,

W. SNODGRASS.

Queen's College,
Kingston, 4th Nov., 1864.

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SERMON.

Finally, brethren, farewell.—II Cor. xiii. 11.

The words we use on particular occasions derive all the significance and force that are in them from the readiness with which they suggest, or the accuracy with which they describe, the circumstances of the position we may happen to occupy. This is obvious from the very great differences that are noticeable in the impressions we receive at different times, from forms of speech which are exactly the same, the variations we experience lying at every possible point between the extremes of depth and faintness. As the road we travel every day, without witnessing a sight unusual enough to engage particular observation, loses at length its uninteresting character by the occurrence of some striking incident, so the most commonplace language ceases to be commonplace when it becomes the expression of extraordinary realizations. In our intercourse and correspondence we are constantly employing terms apparently at random—conventional phrases supplied to us, by a habitual use, without a moment's thought, and rendered formal by the established

customs and recognized manners of the society in which we move. But there are times in which, by reason of special circumstances, these same terms, however little they may have meant theretofore, are expressive of the strongest emotions of which our nature is susceptible. The joy which fills the heart of the exile as he steps upon his native shore, or which one feels on meeting again his dearest friend after a long separation; the sorrow by which we are overcome when the ties we have formed with beings of kindred spirits must be torn asunder, when the fellowship that has for many days proved a source of pleasure and a means of profit must suffer interruption, when the haunts we have loved to frequent must be forsaken;—that joy and sorrow may find an utterance in words we have often used before: but who that has felt it needs to be told that these words are then as different in meaning from their common acceptation, as are the circumstances referred to from the ordinary affairs of life? Then indeed do our current colloquialisms wax so big with import that the mind is fixed exclusively upon the things affecting us, and any attempt at a detailed statement of them yields but a shallow satisfaction.

The same principle applies extensively even to the holy Word of God. With such portions of that precious gift as record the experiences of God's people in former times, occasioned by what befell them in the course of their mortal career,

we may be quite familiar. We may have even frequently read and pondered them with some degree of sympathetic interest. But it is only when the circumstances that first produced them are in some measure repeated, it is only when we find ourselves moving in similar scenes and coming under the influence of similar incidents, that our emotions can at all resemble the feelings which they originally indicated. The words of the text I have often read before, and so, doubtless, my beloved brethren, have you; but there is that in my appearing before you now which invests them with a peculiar character, and makes the utterance of them productive of a singular effect. Eight years have nearly elapsed since you called me to minister to you in holy things. During that period I have humbly attempted, with much feebleness and imperfection, I confess, yet not without some earnestness and devotion, and, I hope I may say, not altogether without success, to honour the awful responsibilities which lie upon the shoulders of every ambassador of Jesus Christ. I have made it my principal business to expound to you, agreeably to the requirements of scriptural truth, the leading doctrines of the Gospel. I have sought by word and by deed to excite in you a becoming regard for the precious realities revealed for our instruction and comfort in the inspired volume. I have endeavoured to enforce upon your attention and esteem the principal points of Christian duty, and espe-

cially to direct your faith and love towards the gracious Master whom I profess to serve—the sinner's Refuge and the Captain of salvation—feeling assured of this one thing, that my preaching must be vain whenever it fails to be a setting forth of Christ and him crucified. I have also mingled with you in those scenes of joy and sorrow which with constant alternations perpetually chequer the life-course of mortals, not merely forming an acquaintance with you, but associating and identifying myself, so to speak, with some of the most important incidents of your personal and domestic histories. And now, in the course of Divine Providence, the leadings of which we are bound to follow however much in doing so we may cross our wishes and pain our feelings, there remaineth for the hour that now is but one solemn and trying task—a task which revives all the responsibilities of my office and vividly recalls with crowding remembrances the particulars of my connection with you—the task of bidding you a final and affectionate farewell. And, not only for the sake of illustrating a principle, but also for the purpose of candidly expressing what I feel, let me say, that in no utterance heretofore of that word by me has there been such an intensity of interest as now invests and burdens it.

Fashioned as we are with numerous adaptations for the enjoyment of social life, it is one of the severest trials of our earthly lot to separate ourselves from fellow-beings with whom we have

contracted a virtuous friendship. During the period of our common sojourn and daily intercourse, attachments are gradually formed and a mutual confidence almost imperceptibly grows up, the extent and strength of which it is impossible to realize until the prospect of separation is made certain and the hour of parting is upon us. Then it is that we begin to be deeply impressed with the wisdom and goodness of our gracious Creator in the establishment of that social system which he has rendered necessary to our happiness, and in the endowment of us with those faculties and sentiments which are indispensable to its maintenance. Then do we make new discoveries of the worth of those with whom we are accustomed to associate, and form new appreciations of the services by which they place us under lasting obligations. A kind of melancholy steals and settles upon our experiences, under the paralyzing effect of scenes and incidents which rush upon the memory and pass in full review before us. We can scarcely think it to be true that familiar faces are to be seen no more, that the grateful smile which has so often lightened our labours and cheered us on amid besetting difficulties is no longer to encourage us, that the kind and gentle words to which we have been accustomed are dying, it may be for ever, upon the ear. Even the inanimate objects among which we have been wont to move, by which we have been assisted to hold intercourse with the Invisible, become im-

pressed with a character of sacredness as they impart to our recollections a fuller and more substantial form. The beautiful woods and fields in which it has been our delight to roam; the favourite walk where, under the courting influence of the grey eventide, we have indulged in speculative thought or sober meditation; the well known trysting-place for the enjoyment of free and unfettered intercourse; the sequestered resort where, unseen by mortal eye, we have engaged in mental conflict; and, more sacred still by far, that little spot in the great sleeping-place of the dead—incessantly attractive, whithersoever we go, of thoughts which never find expression—where the king of terrors retains the hostages we have given him of our own coming surrender to his resistless sway;—not until we turn our backs upon them are we in a position to ascertain how important a place these occupy in the history of our sojourn. Is it any wonder, when we tear ourselves from persons and things thus endeared to us, that the heart should be depressed with sorrow? Even the expectation of renewing our intercourse does not prevent the heaviness we experience; for, as we know not what awaits us in the future, the hope we cherish becomes, by this ignorance, itself so qualified, that it is but slightly instrumental in restraining our emotions. We can only wish the best of each other's welfare as we pursue our several ways; and, commending one another to the grace of our common Protector, who, un-

changeably the same amid all vicissitudes, directs our footsteps and fixes the bounds of our habitations, reciprocate our cordial God-speed, and part with an affectionate farewell.

Of all the ties which, under Providence, bind human beings together, there can be none more sacred and, important, and, rightly formed, none more endearing than that of a pastor to his flock; and, whatever be the views we entertain or the feelings we cherish respecting it, the dissevering of that tie is a matter of most serious concernment to all parties interested. It constitutes a relation which should never be hastily or lightly formed, and, once consummated, nothing but a sense of imperative obligation should ever be permitted to interfere with it. Whether we consider the nature of his office or the Divine ordinance by which it is appointed in the church, or the object for which it exists, or the everlasting results for good or evil which are accomplished by it, it is only when a minister, with simplicity and singleness of aim, stands upon the high ground of pure and obvious duty, that he is justified in entertaining the thought of changing the sphere of his labours. No pleasing dream of prospective ease, no hope of gratifying a selfish desire, no mere ambition to occupy a higher place or exercise a greater influence, will warrant a step so full of importance and so fraught with responsibility. But still in any case, and certainly not the less in that case in which a carefully formed and deliberate

conviction of duty is the prescribing and controlling dictate of the course to be pursued, the purest motives and the most righteous aims will not suffice to divest the separation of the painfulness which belongs to it. A serious and searching review of the period over which his ministrations have extended is not on that account to be avoided. The people whom he is leaving have immortal souls to be cared for and momentous personal concerns both temporal and eternal, and, if true to the spirit of his mission, he must still have some interest in their welfare. He will reflect with seriousness upon the influence which his administration of word and ordinance may have had upon them. He will speculate, in spite of himself, on the probable results of his departure. In the sight of God and by His appointment every minister of the Gospel "is a sweet savour of Christ in them that believe, and in them that perish; to the one he is the savour of life unto life, and to the other the savour of death unto death;" and were no other consideration than this to have weight with him, the termination of his pastoral relation and spiritual intercourse must be to him an occasion of solemn reflection and tender feeling. And if there be anything which more than another is calculated to make him pensive and serious, it is the belief that there are those among his people, however few the number may be, who can share to some extent his trial and contemplate it with a kindred sympathy.

My dear friends, while I do acknowledge it to be no small trial to take my leave of you, in the spirit just indicated would I find a justification of the resolution upon which I am acting, and endeavour to meet and bear the burden of present affliction. In full view of the responsibility I am incurring, and without the slightest affectation, I am constrained to say that much has been required of high consideration and sense of duty to reconcile me to the course, to the choice of which there is now no alternative. This at least was due to the proposal made to me to accept another sphere of usefulness, and this from the very first I endeavoured to accord to it. It has taken no transient or trivial thought to satisfy me of the propriety and wisdom of resigning so very desirable a charge as this—of withdrawing from a field which possesses very many inducements, advantages, and facilities for one who would be faithful in the service of God and the work of the ministry—of leaving a people towards whom I have reason to feel the greatest gratitude, attachment, and love, and among whom I would very willingly have been allowed to remain. But for other considerations which have weighed with me, I could not have withstood the indulgence and kindness which, amid many shortcomings, I have ever experienced at your hands, nor resisted the appeal which your constant liberality in maintaining religious ordinances and giving of your means for the advancement of charitable and missionary schemes, power-

fully and persuasively addressed to me. It has been an exercise of mingled pain and gratification to estimate the value of the encouragements to continue where I am, to count the cost of the sacrifices I must make in relinquishing my present position. But the thing has been done; done with deliberation and conscientiousness on my part, and with an undeserved measure of approbation on your part; yet done with reluctance on the part of both of us. Let us hope that it meets the approval of the great Head of the Church, and that by his blessing it may be rendered subservient to the advancement of his glory.

In further addressing to you some parting words, let me briefly refer to the past. Whatever has been the quality of my labours amongst you, they have at least been very varied. They may have been misguided; but they have not been few. I may admit the charge of indiscretion, as to the manner of my work; but I will not confess to that of idleness. Great diversity is a necessary characteristic of the work of the ministry in all city charges. Apart from strictly congregational duty there is a vast number of extra-parochial claims upon the time and attention of a diligent labourer. While striving to do justice to the former, there is a large proportion of the latter which he can scarcely resist, if he would act according to the spirit which he conceives to be right, the spirit of the Master whom he serves. The true idea of the usefulness of a Christian community, as well as of an

individual Christian, is expressed by the similitude of a city set upon a hill, which cannot be hid, but which makes its presence felt in beneficial influences upon the surrounding neighbourhoods. This is not always thought of in the judgment which is formed of a pastor's obligations and his manner of honouring them. But it does seem to be both legitimate and proper, that the members of a society professedly Christian should be willing to share with others the privileges they themselves enjoy from their maintenance amongst them of Gospel ordinances. Nay more, it should be to them a matter of ambition and satisfaction to unite cordially in the provision of means for the amplest diffusion of all those blessings, both temporal and spiritual, which our holy religion teaches and constrains us to disseminate. As to the extent and efficiency of my labours in both of these respects, I have long been dissatisfied, and of late this feeling has grown upon me until I feel it to be a very heavy pressure.. For this, the likelihood is, that no one is so much to blame as myself. Having occasion to lament the deficiency of means, it would only have been my duty to call them forth more strenuously. My hope is, that wherein I have failed, another may succeed ; and if the attempt should ever be made to overtake more thoroughly the work which remains to be done both among you and around you, let me earnestly solicit your Christian consideration, sympathy, and support in its behalf. Forget not that the number and nature

of your privileges constitute the measure of your responsibilities, and that of them to whom much has been given shall much be required by the Judge of all the earth, when he shall call mankind to their account. Cultivate, I implore you, the grace of liberality. Look around you for opportunities of dispensing the beneficence which it is in your power to manifest. Anticipate what is needful duly to encourage the practice of good works, instead of waiting for a call to engage in them. Forget not, I beseech you, that forwardness and activity in this respect is as much a means of personal edification and growth in meetness for the kingdom of heaven as any of the ordinances of religion upon which you anxiously wait. It is itself an ordinance of religion, for the Lord Jesus Christ demands of his disciples that they bring forth much fruit to the praise and honour of his name.

As to the success of my labours, it becomes me to speak with caution and humility. The ablest minister of the New Testament is but a feeble instrument in the hands of God for the salvation of immortal souls. The time that now is is not the harvest-season, but the period which the great Master-husbandman has appointed for the sowing of the seed. Nevertheless, it would indeed be a most painful thing for me, in the circumstances in which I am at present placed, if I were obliged to take my departure from among you, without any reason to think, without any encouragement

to cherish the confidence or hope, that my labours have not been altogether in vain. I cannot believe that for eight years I have preached from this pulpit, Sabbath after Sabbath, that Gospel which is the power and the wisdom of God to the salvation of souls, and that none have been strengthened and comforted by the instructions to which they have listened. I cannot reflect upon those solemn seasons, one of which we this day enjoyed in the observance of the Lord's Supper, and many of which have been times of refreshing to my own soul from the presence of the Lord; and feel myself driven to the conclusion that not one of you has found them to be as wells of water by the way-side of life, tending to satisfy your spiritual hunger and thirst, and to establish your hearts in faith, and love, and holy obedience towards God, your heavenly Father, and Jesus Christ, your Lord and Saviour. I cannot recall the numerous afflictive dispensations by which almost every family circle has been visited and impressed, and especially those death-bed scenes at so many of which I have been called to wait, and at not a few to witness the peaceful and triumphant departure of members of this congregation; and fail to thank God that the incorruptible seed of his word has not always fallen upon hard and stony ground, but that it has found a lodgement in the soil of some hearts, which have not resisted but yielded to its convincing, converting, and sanctifying power. And, though these grounds of hope should

be reduced to the very lowest point and all visible evidence of satisfactory results should prove distrustful, yet there remaineth for me that source of comfort, from which it is the privilege of every minister who labours with a single eye to the glory of God to draw some consolation, namely, the assurance that while the treasure of the Gospel is committed unto earthen vessels, it is that the excellency of the power thereof may be of God and not of us; and, therefore, that though neither he that planteth nor he that watereth may see the increase, yet will not He who suffereth not his word to return to him void, permit the service which is rendered in his name to pass without some fruit and reward to crown it with success.

"Finally, brethren, farewell." *Rejoice* is the literal translation of this word farewell. Accordingly the Apostle immediately exhorts, "be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." It seems paradoxical to make the time of parting an occasion of rejoicing; but this is one of those paradoxes which are not of unfrequent occurrence in the word of God. By itself we might regard it as an insult to our feelings; but, taken in connection with the admonition and promise which follow, it is seasonable and appropriate. No apology is needed for the expression of the wish that every comfort and blessing, such as your heavenly Father knows it to be for your good to receive, may be enjoyed by you all through

life, and that especially your souls may be established in all spiritual health and prosperity; that the God of all grace may become more and more the portion of your cup and the lot of your inheritance; and that, begotten again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ye may be enabled to hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of your hope even unto the end. Follow the Apostolic counsel; strive to stand perfect and complete in the law of God; let your spirits exult in the comfort wherewith all the saints are comforted of God; be united more and more closely one to another in the bonds and fellowship of the Gospel; pray that ye may be strengthened and confirmed in the peace of believing; and, as much as lieth in you, follow peace with all men, and holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. And then, of a truth, will ye realize the substance of the promise, that the God of love and peace shall be with you; and then, if not immediately, yet by and by, when more marvellous disclosures than aught we wot of now shall be made, it will be to the unworthy instrument who exhorts you to walk worthily of the high vocation wherewith ye are called, an occasion of unspeakable, endless satisfaction; "for what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy."

Brethren, we part. I trust we shall meet again. I anticipate opportunities in the future, which I

shall gladly embrace, of declaring to you the counsel of the Lord and otherwise promoting your spiritual interests. Should this be denied, it is yet a settled verity in our subsequent history that we shall meet. In that narrow, gloomy house to which we are all fast hastening, where the rich and the poor meet together, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest, where all distinctions are annulled and all differences forgotten, where the dust of the crowned head mingles with the scattered remains of the untitled peasant,—there we shall meet. It will be an unconscious meeting. But yet again shall we meet; before the great white throne, the judgment seat of Christ. The Gospel net is dragging us together, alas! too insensibly, to the shore of the eternal world, on which, by an unerring discrimination, the good shall be forever separated from the bad. In view of that solemn meeting, which dwarfs into insignificance all other events of our history, my brethren, let us daily live; for it let us diligently prepare. Let us cling to the rock of salvation. Let us adhere to the standard of the Prince of Peace, who, though his bodily presence is withdrawn from the church, is mindful still of his people's interests, and engaged in forwarding them, as he said to his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."